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On Election Day, Students Rally for Voting Rights at Texas' Oldest HBCU

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Prairie View A&M students, galvanized by yet another fight for equal voting rights, march to the polls.

by Michael Barajas (<https://www.texasobserver.org/author/michael-barajas/>)

Tue, Nov 6, 2018 at 3:08 pm CST



Jayla Allen, one of the PVAMU students represented by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in their lawsuit against Waller County over restricted early voting access. *MICHAEL BARAJAS*

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When Jessi [REDACTED] [REDACTED] other students to vote, she takes a moment to [REDACTED] **OBSERVER** (<https://www.texasobserver.org/>) [REDACTED] Students at Texas' oldest historically black college — and how they have always fought back.

This year, Prairie View students fought for equal access to early voting (<https://www.texasobserver.org/in-the-midterms-texans-face-a-panoply-of-voter-suppression/>), but in previous elections the stakes were even higher (<https://www.pvamu.edu/1876/2017/03/31/the-walk-of-political-engagement-at-pvamu/>). In 1971, after the 26th Amendment extended the vote to people 18 years and older, Waller County prohibited students from voting until students fought the case all the way to the Supreme Court and eventually won the right. But Waller County's white leaders weren't defeated. Until 2013, there wasn't a polling place on campus. Students had to find a way to the county community center a mile away along a busy roadway, only to face long lines. Many made the trek on foot.



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Jessmine Cornelius 

This election week of early voting, Cornelius, a junior studying history at Prairie View A&M University, worked with other activists to drive dozens of students to polling places in nearby towns after Waller County officials initially denied the majority-black city a single early voting polling place (<https://www.naacpldf.org/wp-content/uploads/Complaint-Allen-v.-Waller-County-filed.pdf>).

At a rally and march on campus Tuesday to fire up students to vote, Cornelius made sure to remind students' about the history of activism at Prairie View.

"This is what your former Panthers fought for," Cornelius said, referencing the school's mascot. "Yes, there's a history of discrimination, but also of us overcoming it."

The Prairie View students chanted and blared music atop a trailer that snaked through the university streets, attracting some 200 students that marched with them to the campus polling place. They carried impromptu signs with messages like "No Vote, No Hope" and "PVAMU's Ancestors EARNED the RIGHT to Vote in Waller County!"

"We have power when we turn out," said Jessica Nicole Purnell, a junior who organized the march. "That's why Waller County's afraid of us."

This year, Prairie View again became a national flashpoint in the battle for voting rights (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/03/us/politics/voting-suppression-elections.html>). On the heels of a snafu (<https://www.khou.com/article/news/local/voter-registration-issues-arise-at-prairie-view-am-university/285-603008371>) that threw thousands of student voter registrations into question, the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund sued (<https://www.naacpldf.org/wp-content/uploads/Complaint-Allen-v.-Waller-County-filed.pdf>) Waller County officials for refusing to extend early voting hours in the city.

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Participants at the rally held up “No Vote No Hope” signs as they marched to the student center, the campus polling location. *MICHAEL BARAJAS*

The lawsuit, on behalf of several Prairie View students, pointed out that majority-white parts of Waller County were given more early voting opportunities than Prairie View residents. County officials insisted it wasn’t discrimination, but rather a decision based on limited resources. The lawsuit called those justifications “tenuous pretexts for racial discrimination against black voters in Prairie View.”

Frank Jackson, the city’s former mayor (<https://www.texasobserver.org/prairie-view-mayor-frank-jackson-interview/>) who’s been at the forefront of voting rights efforts in Prairie View, says this year’s voting problems appear to have galvanized students in the city. “This was all them,” he said pointing to the crowd outside the student center. “This is their game, and now we’re out here to support them however we can.”

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Carla Richardson, 61, from Houston, joined the crowd, beaming with pride. Her father taught at the school for 30 years. She graduated from the school, as did her son. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s horrendous that here we are in 2018 and we still have to march for the same thing that I fought for in 1979, that my son fought for in 2008.”

“But I’m so happy these students are still out here marching, still fighting,” she said. “It is beautiful to see them marching.”



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Michael Barajas is a staff writer covering civil rights for the *Observer*. You can reach him on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/michaelsbarajas>) or at barajas@texasobserver.org (<mailto:barajas@texasobserver.org>).

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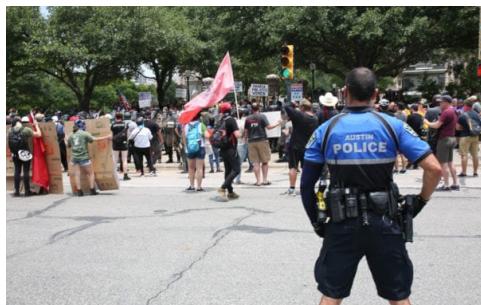
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by Michael Barajas (<https://www.texasobserver.org/author/michael-barajas/>)

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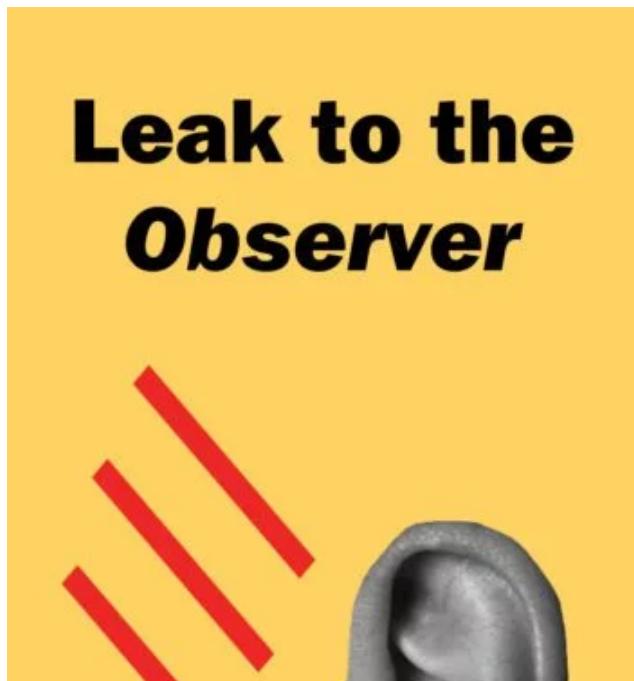
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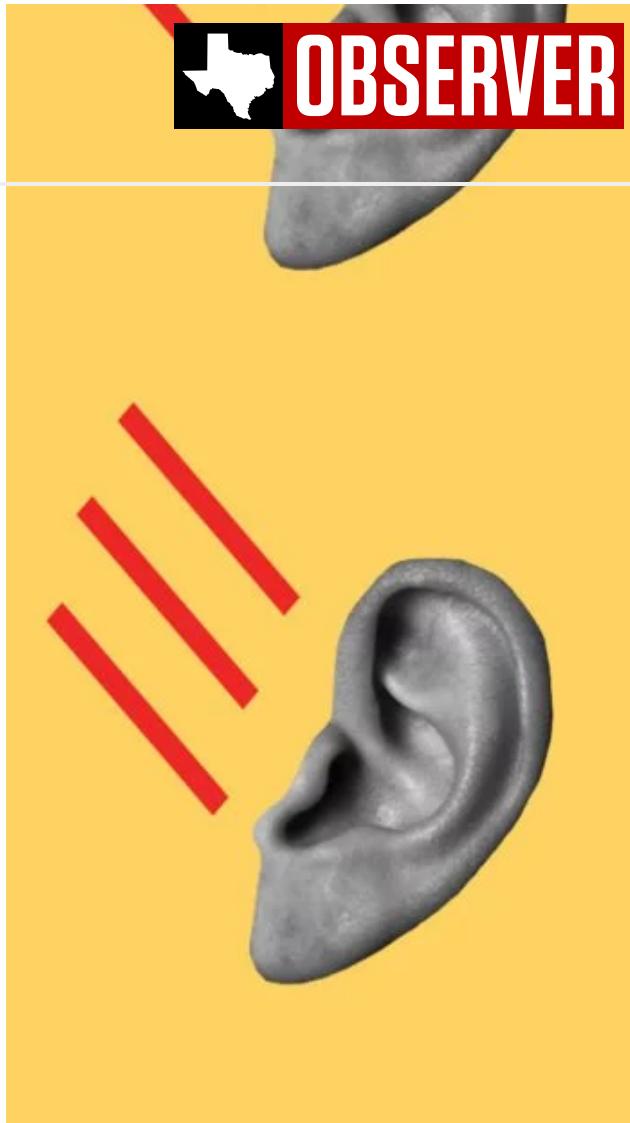
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